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ABSTRACT

This report assesses student perceptions of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). Individual and focus-group interviews were conducted with approximately 100 students in 6 schools in 3 geographically different school districts across Kentucky. In addition, a brief exit interview was conducted with principals to solicit feedback concerning student interviews and to document to what extent KERA components had been implemented. Sites selected included four rural schools and two urban schools serving junior high and high school students. Student comments indicate that students were knowledgeable and articulate about those aspects of reform that had affected them directly. They also expressed awareness that Kentucky schools and students were below national standards in educational achievement. Students felt KERA might help Kentucky students compete with students from other states for college admission and employment. Though respondents reported increased work associated with KERA such as student writing portfolios, most thought that portfolio work was improving their writing and allowed them to explain their work more thoroughly. For the most part, students enjoyed the additional group work brought about by KERA, noting the importance of improving their communication and interpersonal skills. Students reported that KERA increased stress on teachers and students, including worries that the state might take control of their school if performance was substandard. Implementation of school councils was viewed positively as were extended school services and increasing knowledge of computers and technology. Overall, students thought KERA was having a positive effect on their education. Appendices include site visit letters, student selection instructions, principal survey, and interview protocols. (LP)

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Perceptions of School Change: Interviews with Kentucky Students

A Report Submitted to the Kentucky Caucus
of the
AEL Board of Directors

July 1994

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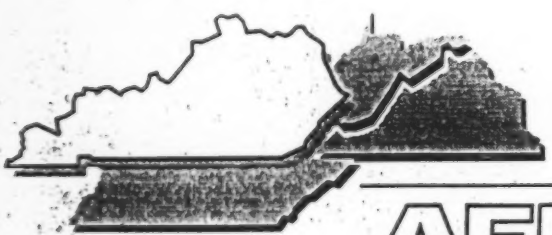

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PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CHANGE:

INTERVIEWS WITH KENTUCKY STUDENTS

A Report Submitted to the Kentucky Caucus of the AEL Board of Directors

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July 1994

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kentucky Caucus (Kentucky members of the AEL Board of Directors) asked AEL staff to conduct a study to capture students' perceptions of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990. The project was approved by the Caucus at the April 1993 Board meeting. Instrument development and initial site contacts began in the fall of 1993, with the data collected and analyzed in the spring of 1994. This report summarizes the impressions of approximately 100 students in six schools in three geographically different districts across Kentucky.

A qualitative research approach was selected to assess student perceptions and achieve the objectives of this study. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with selected students. Focus group interviews help to determine the perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking of various consumer groups. The students of Kentucky are clearly the most important consumers of the Kentucky Education Reform Act.

Caution is in order, however, when employing such a qualitative approach. While the methodology associated with qualitative research elicits rich, in-depth responses, the information in this document ***is not*** intended to represent the views of students throughout all of Kentucky. It ***is*** intended to accurately represent the perceptions of the student participants in this study. Thus, while the conclusions discussed within this report are not generalizable, these initial observations and student statements may help generate hypotheses for further research.

The individual and group interviews we conducted indicated that students from three very different districts and six different schools were fairly ***knowledgeable and articulate*** about those aspects of the reform that had affected them directly (especially writing portfolios).

Student participant comments indicated their awareness of a ***common perception*** that Kentucky schools and students are below national standards in educational achievement. Students felt KERA might help Kentucky students compete with students from other states for college admission and employment.

Though students reported increased work associated with the portfolios, most thought the portfolio work was ***improving their writing***. Students indicated that math portfolios allowed them the opportunity to explain their work more thoroughly.

For the most part, students enjoyed the additional group work brought about by KERA. Many indicated the importance of working with others in the real world, so improvement in ***communication and interpersonal skills*** was meaningful.

Students reported that KERA has increased ***stress*** on teachers and students. Some worry about the state taking control of their school if performance is below the school's state-mandated threshold. The portfolio system elicits some stress due to deadlines. Students expressed a great deal of concern about the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS). Students and teachers did not know what to expect from this new state assessment system.

School councils seemed to be viewed positively, to the extent students were aware of them. Some students viewed school governance as having been very "political" in the past. It appears that most students who were aware of the councils thought the school councils were doing what is best for students.

Extended school services (a program to provide additional educational opportunities for students in need of extra learning time) appeared to be ***very useful*** to students. Though many

participants had not directly engaged in the program's activities, they reported being very aware of the services and described positive experiences of others.

Students described the importance of ***computers and technology***. They also indicated that the reform should "***make school fun***." They reported that students learn more when school is enjoyable.

Overall, students thought KERA was having a positive effect on their education. Their responses were more positive than negative. Those who expressed negative opinions about KERA seemed to be primarily concerned with the effect that reform might have on preparation for and acceptance at college.

INTRODUCTION

Midway through the implementation of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990, many policymakers in Kentucky and elsewhere were asking, "How much systemic reform is taking place in Kentucky? What are students' perceptions of the changes in their education?" The Kentucky Caucus of the AEL Board of Directors asked AEL to capture students' perceptions of KERA. This report summarizes the impressions of students in six schools in three geographically different districts across Kentucky.

Purpose

The Kentucky Caucus commissioned this study at the April 1993 Board meeting. The purpose of the study was to assess student perceptions of KERA in a sample of students in Kentucky.

Objectives

The primary objectives of the project were to:

(1) describe what students think school reform ought to accomplish, and

(2) describe students' perceptions of their education since the passage of KERA and any changes they perceive in their schools.

Audiences

The primary audiences for this report are the members of the Kentucky Caucus of the AEL Board of Directors and the students and staff of the participating schools of the study. Secondary audiences include education practitioners in Kentucky, the general citizenry of Kentucky, and researchers interested in educational reform.

PROCEDURES

Site Selection

The project plan called for visits to three districts across Kentucky. General criteria for site selection included a reputation for extensive school change, geographical representation, and an urban/rural mix. Based upon feedback from the Kentucky Caucus, three county districts were identified and initial contact was made in November 1993 to obtain permission to conduct the interviews. A letter was sent to each site (see Appendix A) to confirm the site visit. One district was identified from western Kentucky, one from eastern Kentucky, and one from central Kentucky.

The three identified sites were contacted and site visits scheduled for January. The initial site identified from western Kentucky chose not to participate after missing a number of school days due to inclement weather and an outbreak of flu. Severe weather also postponed the January site visits at two of the districts. Site visits to all three districts were completed in March and April 1994. In each district, students at both a middle/junior high and a senior high school were interviewed. Elementary school students were not interviewed because of the time and fiscal limitations associated with the study.

Site Description

The western Kentucky site consisted of one junior high school that served approximately 1,000 students in grades 7 through 9, and a high school that served approximately 1,700 students in grades 10 through 12. Both schools served a rural population. Both schools served a small percentage of minority students.

The eastern Kentucky site consisted of one middle school that served approximately 650 students in grades 6 through 8, and a high school that served approximately 700 students in grades 9 through 12. Both schools served a rural population. Neither school served any minority students.

The central Kentucky site consisted of one middle school that served approximately 900 students in grades 6 through 8, and a high school that served approximately 1,200 students in grades 9 through 12. Both schools served an urban population and a significant number of minority students.

Student Selection

In each school, school personnel were instructed to randomly select a sample of 10 students (five from each of the upper two grades at both the middle/junior and senior high schools) to participate in a focus group interview. In addition, six other students (three from each of the upper two grades at both the middle/junior and senior high schools) were to be randomly selected by school personnel to participate in individual interviews. A copy of the selection instructions can be found in Appendix B. School personnel at each site completed the selection process.

Data Collection

Three data collection instruments were used to collect student responses and one was used with principals. First, a brief ***inventory*** (see Appendix C) concerning selected KERA components was administered to students participating in the focus group interview and to a few who were interviewed individually. This inventory served two purposes. It helped the researchers

determine students' familiarity with KERA programs before discussion started. It also helped focus student thinking on KERA prior to the focus group interview. The inventory was completed by students at the beginning of the ***focus group interview.*** The focus group interview protocol is found in Appendix D. Students involved in ***individual interviews*** responded to the same questions as those in the focus group interview. The individual interview protocol is found in Appendix E.

After all student interviews were completed, a brief ***exit interview*** was conducted with the principal at each site. The purpose of this interview was to provide preliminary feedback to the principal from the student interviews and to document which, and to what extent, KERA components had been implemented in each school. The principal exit interview protocol is found in Appendix F.

FINDINGS

Clearly, students in Kentucky really do care about their education. Systemic reform has obviously affected students at many levels. Though the effect may be experienced to different degrees, students were aware of changes and could describe their effects.

The information collected from the site visits is summarized below by data collection method.

Principal Interviews

(1) What components of KERA have been implemented in your school as of this school year? All six schools in the study had implemented site-based decisionmaking (SBDM)

councils. At the two schools in the central Kentucky district, the councils had been in place prior to the passage of KERA and differed in size and makeup from the KERA specifications. The principals at all six schools also noted that language arts and math portfolios were in place. A Youth Services Center (YSC) to provide integrated health and social services to overcome non-school barriers to learning had been developed in only one district; however, both of the other districts were pursuing the establishment of centers. Extended school services, a program to provide additional educational opportunities for students in need of extra learning time, was in place to some degree at all sites. Technology (i.e., computer labs) and interdisciplinary group projects were incorporated at each site. In the central Kentucky site, group processes had also been implemented before passage of KERA.

(2) Which components have been easy to implement? Why? Responses varied to this question. Some principals described ESS and interdisciplinary group projects as having been easy to implement. Others, however, indicated the opposite. One principal indicated that most of the KERA components had been easy to implement while other principals suggested that none had been easy to implement because the reform was a new and evolving process.

(3) Which components have been difficult to implement? Why? Most of the components were described as being difficult to implement by one principal or another, noting a number of reasons for the difficulty. One noted that the technology component had been difficult because of the lack of funds. Another indicated that establishing a YSC was difficult because no one locally had the grant writing skills needed. One principal described portfolios as having been difficult to implement because of the scoring mechanisms and the fact that some teachers waited until near the end of the year to assign the writing tasks. At least two principals described some

resistance from their teachers in implementing various KERA components. Most said, however, that teachers were doing their best to "get it all done."

(4) How do you think your faculty members have received KERA? This particular question stimulated a great deal of response from the principals. At one site, the principals in both schools indicated their teachers had received KERA very well, with some minor resistance. Both principals reporting feeling fortunate that KERA had been received so positively. Both middle and high school principals at another site described teacher reception as "with mixed emotions." Both described teachers' positive attitudes toward the increased emphasis on writing, the technology component, and students being involved in group work. However, each also noted that teachers in their school were very concerned about the new assessment system (some even fearing possible sanctions) and the "unrealistic" timeline for full KERA implementation. Each principal at the third site suggested even greater teacher apprehension. One indicated that about 50 percent of the teachers were "working at a fever pitch," about 25 percent were willing but were unmotivated or lacked skills, while the other 25 percent engaged in active resistance. Both principals in this site also indicated teacher concern over fairness of the new testing and assessment system.

(5) How do you think the parents of children in your school have received KERA? What are some typical responses?

The most common response from principals to this question was that, for the most part, parents were still generally uninformed about KERA. In fact, four of the six principals noted that over half of the parents knew little, if anything, about KERA. However, most principals acknowledged that those parents who were informed to some extent were generally supportive.

Some parental concerns reported by principals were doubt about the long-range success of KERA, bright or gifted students being held back or left out, and the perception of their children as the "guinea pigs" for KERA changes. Other parents felt that their children were not receiving enough of the "basics" in school. One principal noted that it appeared "parents feel how their kids do about KERA."

(6) What do you think the major impact of KERA has been on your students to date? Many responses were offered to this question. Principals in general thought that students were receiving a better education. They indicated students were more involved in and more responsible for their own learning. Many noted the emphasis on writing and students learning in a less traditional way. Some indicated that student communication skills and self-esteem were enhanced. One principal noted that more money was now available for instructional materials. Others saw that students were beginning to apply what they learned in school to the real world.

(7) How do you expect KERA to affect your school between now and 1996? Different responses were elicited by this question. One principal said, "to develop the total child and improve their overall performance." Another suggested a reorganization of how time in school was spent as well as changes in requirements for graduation. Performing well on the state assessment was noted by several principals. Two principals specifically said that student writing skills would continue to improve.

(8) Is there anything you would like to tell us about KERA in your school that we did not think to ask? Not all principals had things to add, but a couple of them noted that the components of KERA need to be addressed continually. One said, "KERA needs to be constantly appraised, assessed, and fine-tuned." One principal indicated that KERA had definitely challenged

her school's teachers and that the reform may have separated those who wanted to change from those who did not want to change.

Student Inventory Data

Data from the student-completed inventory (N=63) suggested that students were more familiar with the academic components of KERA that affected all students (i.e., portfolios and new assessment techniques) than with the components that affected only some students (extended school services and Youth Services Centers). These data proved inconclusive concerning the effectiveness of extended school services and Youth Services Centers because of incomplete or missing data or because most participants had not used or were unfamiliar with these two specific components. This lack of familiarity also was captured in the interviews.

Four items from the student inventory, however, seemed to indicate that students were familiar with KERA in general. These rating items are discussed below.

(1) How much do you know about the Kentucky Education Reform Act? Students were asked to rate this question on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "nothing" and 5 being "a lot." The mean rating (N=63) was 3.19, with a standard deviation of .76. A large majority of the respondents (54) rated the item a 3 or a 4. This seems to indicate that students felt as if they knew at least a moderate amount about KERA.

(2) How often do you work in groups on tasks that include more than one subject? Students were asked to rate this question on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "often." The mean rating (N=63) was 3.78 with a standard deviation of .99. An overwhelming majority (59) indicated they worked in groups occasionally or often.

(3) Do your teachers cooperate to teach interdisciplinary units? Students were asked to rate this question on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "often." The mean rating for this item (N=56) was 3.21 with a standard deviation of .87. While only 2 students responded with "often," a clear majority (44) rated the item a 3 (occasionally) or 4.

(4) Do students have more choice about what they work on? Students were also asked to rate this question on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "many more choices." The mean rating for this item (N=63) was 2.90 with a standard deviation of 1.07. The rating for this item was normally distributed, indicating that students seemed to think they had about the same choice as they did before.

Students were also asked on the checklist to name one thing they knew most about KERA. For middle school students, the most frequent response was "portfolios" (noted 11 times), with "group work," "more writing," and "new assessment system" mentioned five times each. Some of the responses mentioned only once were most notable, however. One student indicated, "I know not one teacher or counselor has an original copy of KERA even though they're supposed to be teaching it." Another noted, "That it is something very important in my school." A seemingly well-informed student noted, "The KERA bill itself is 655 sections long and is aimed toward the restructuring of our schools." The writing emphasis was on the mind of one student, who simply said, "Writing, writing, and more writing." Only one student reported not knowing much about KERA.

The responses of the high school students echoed those of the middle schoolers with portfolios mentioned most frequently (12 times) and group work mentioned eight times. The high school students responded with "more writing" fewer times (only twice), but did mention change

more frequently (six times) than the middle schoolers. Notable responses included, "Obviously the state of Kentucky would not be making all the schools in Kentucky reform if it was going to do no good at all. It seems that with this much change, KERA is bound to prove productive in the future." Another indicated, "We are using KERA to try and better the education system of Kentucky because of its weaknesses." One student specifically described dislike for group work saying, "We have to work in groups! That is so stupid. You don't learn as well in groups! I hate KERA!"

Individual Interviews

Six students in each school (N=36) participated in one-on-one interviews with AEL staff. Interviews were conducted in a quiet part of the school and lasted about 10-20 minutes on average. All students randomly selected chose to participate and seemed to answer questions freely. Their responses are summarized below by each question.

(1) In your own words, what do you think school reform in Kentucky means? Clearly students thought school reform was an effort to improve the education system in Kentucky and to "help students learn more." Over half of the respondents described school reform in this way. Four students noted that school reform assisted students in learning to work in groups and with others, while three described it as a new way of teaching and an effort to improve students' writing. Some students thought of reform as a way to improve discipline, provide for equality of schools throughout the state, or to "make school easier" for students.

(2) What should school reform accomplish? While more variety was observed in responses to this question, the most frequent theme was to improve student performance or "help

students learn more." This response was noted 10 times. The next most frequently noted themes (described six times each) were teaching students to work in groups and with other people, teaching students skills for the "real world" and life after high school, motivating students to learn, and making school fun. Reported four times each were helping students become successful and helping students who needed it most. Improving discipline and increasing attendance were reported three times each.

(3) What changes have you noticed in your education since KERA was implemented in 1990? Students in the individual interviews reported noticing general changes in their education since KERA implementation in 1990. Among the most frequently reported change was increased group work. An equal number of students (six) mentioned learning more or understanding more as a result of the changes. A student said, "Before KERA, it was straight out of the book. Since KERA, it is more interesting. We still get the material, but you don't even realize you're learning." Three students each mentioned teaching had improved, and testing was better. One student reported, "Teaching has gotten better. They have made it more comfortable."

Some students noted negative changes. One student said, "Classrooms are not as productive. Teachers fall behind and have to rush to cover all materials. The classroom is more stressful. I can tell that in the faces of teachers and administrators." One suggested that working with others "brings you down," and one student indicated there was more work.

- **Extended school services.** Most students reported being familiar with extended school services. Of the students who were familiar with the program, most reported that it was a good idea, helped students keep up, and allowed for more individualized assistance. A comment from one student was, "It's great. Teachers have time to help kids pull up their grades and to teach kids more on subjects students are having trouble

with." Another said, "It's an excellent tutorial program. I know students who make good grades take advantage of it."

- **Interdisciplinary group projects.** The term interdisciplinary appeared to be unfamiliar to students; however, most associated it with the increased group work. In that context, students reported mostly positive comments concerning group work. They described collaboration as very helpful and meaningful to them, indicated that different students made different contributions for the good of the group, and that the group work increased their learning and skill development. One student commented, "I like working in groups. You have other people to help put together one answer. You learn others' opinions of things." Another suggested, "It's good because it gives students a chance to work together. It's more like a real-life situation, to solve a problem and work with people."

  Two students noted that working in groups allowed them the opportunity to learn more about their fellow students, and two students suggested that learning something from a fellow student was easier and less intimidating than learning from a teacher. Two students noted a problem with all students contributing equally. One said, "It's hard to get others in the group to work equally."

- **Portfolios**. Students were clearly most familiar with portfolios. All students were involved in completing portfolios in both math and language arts. Many students noted that their writing had increased a great amount. The comment that reflected the opinions of most students was, "At first I wasn't too thrilled about portfolios, but now I'm seeing that it's helping. In the long run, it will help with grammar and speech. Everyone needs to be a good writer." Another comment was, "It's a lot of hard work, but probably for our benefit."

  Many students noted that the math portfolios required a different sort of work than they had done in math previously. They indicated they were now able to explain what they were doing, rather than "just come up with the answer." One student reported, "Portfolios are a lot of hard work, but will benefit us, especially in math. Math, most times, just deals with numbers, but portfolios allow you to apply writing skills so you can combine writing and math, which is good. They are a good experience for us."

  Students also noted increased pressure associated with portfolios, for both students and teachers. Some students described examples of teachers waiting until late in the year to assign portfolio pieces. One student reported, "I also feel they are not so good in some ways. The portfolio [assignments] get crunched together." Another student noted, "At first, portfolios disappointed teachers. They didn't know what to expect. Last year's work didn't mean much." One student lightheartedly described the pressure

for students. "I love to write and this falls under things I like to do. But teachers make a big deal out of portfolios--you would think each one is a presentation to God!"

- **New state assessment program**. Most students were familiar with the testing system (KIRIS), even if they had not actually taken the tests. Some of the sites were preparing for the testing. Some students reported not much difference from the "old state tests," but most students who were familiar with the new system noted the increase in the open-ended questions. They described the increase in writing. Some students thought the new tests were more difficult. One student said, "They have tough questions. Because of our experience with portfolios we could understand the questions. I think it's better for the students."

- **Youth Services Center**. Only one school had established a Youth Services Center at the time of the study. Students in other sites were not familiar with Youth Services Centers. The students who had used or were familiar with a center voiced positive opinions. One student noted, "If you have a problem, you can talk to them about it. It is really good because it gives us a place we can go and talk. It helps kids work out problems outside of school so they can concentrate on school." Another student said, "I went and talked to the counselor and got good advice."

- **School council**. Students were not very familiar with this component, though each school had formed a school council. Students often confused the council with PTAs or student councils. In one high school, students were more familiar with the council, because student council representatives attended the council meetings.

  One student said, "I'm not too familiar with SBDM, but I have heard parents say it's too time-consuming. It may help some, but students are not involved. If students have a request, it goes to student council, and they pass it along to the school council." Another student familiar with the council suggested, "It has a lot of power and makes major decisions. It takes the power away from the central office." Another student said, "I've heard about it. I don't know much, they took spanking out of school." "It's a good mix of people but they should have a student on the council, one that is mature and responsible," said another student.

(4) Have those changes affected your education, and if so, how? The effect of the reform components on students seemed to relate primarily to writing and group work. The emphasis on writing was noted most frequently (12 times) and the emphasis on group work was noted on eight occasions. An increase in grades was noted six times, while positive experiences with tutoring and an increase in motivation were noted five times each. Responses occurring

three times or less included: requires more work from students, provides more variety in learning, allows students to express own views, requires students to explain their answers more, KERA is stressful, KERA is a bad idea, and prepares students for the real world.

(5) What are the two most important things you need to know or be able to do by the time you graduate from high school? Overwhelmingly, students thought they needed to be prepared for college or life after high school. Many emphasized the need for the "basics" with writing mentioned 10 times, math eight times, and English five times. Working in groups or with others, communication skills, and good study habits were noted four times each. Three students noted the need for greater knowledge of technology (computers), and three suggested needing the skills to make their own decisions.

(6) What would you like to see KERA do for students in Kentucky? More variety was evident in the responses to this question. However, the most frequent response was to increase student performance and "help students learn more." Interestingly, six students indicated they would like to see a class for students and/or parents on KERA. This was the second most frequent response. Five students thought that KERA should produce equal opportunity across the state, and four each thought that KERA should: improve education in Kentucky; prepare students for the "real world;" and produce well-rounded, responsible students. Three students each thought that KERA should meet student needs, decrease the dropout rate, and teach students to cooperate with others.

Focus Group Interviews

In general, the responses from the focus group interviews (N=60) were consistent with those obtained from the individual interviews. Illustrative responses are provided below.

(1) In your own words, what do you think school reform in Kentucky means? One student commented, "I guess it means that the Kentucky educational system is having a lot of problems, and it is trying to direct attention to those things and what things need to be strengthened and what the weaknesses are. Just to strengthen those weaknesses in order to make the overall better and some of the students coming out of Kentucky's schools will get along in college and stuff, and they will have the same level as other students from other states." Another said, "I think school reform is trying to make education better for students so that they'll know more after they go through high school and be better prepared to go through the world." "I think it is a restructuring of the school system to make education more effective overall," said another student. One student thought of it as a housecleaning for disinterested teachers: "Getting rid of teachers who don't care about what they teach or how they teach it and get all of them to teach one way so it's more understandable to everyone."

(2) What should school reform accomplish? Most students indicated that school reform should better prepare students for college or whatever one plans to do after high school. Many also indicated that it should help to motivate students to want to learn. "I think it ought to make the kids motivated and want to learn. Make them want to further their education and futures." One student noted, "It encourages them from being discouraged. A lot of kids graduate from high school and they think 'I can't go to college.' They think they're not on the college

level." Other students thought reform should provide additional opportunities for students. One participant suggested, "Opportunities in a lot of different things and not just in the basic subjects."

(3) What changes have you noticed in your education since KERA was implemented in 1990? In general, student responses from the focus group interviews echoed those heard in the individual interviews about these specific components.

The most general changes noted were the increase in writing, the keeping of portfolios, and state testing. "The big change is the writing, all the writing we have to do," reported a student. One student said, "Well, the testing for one thing. It's not multiple choice any more. They want you to apply your knowledge to practical problems, and they want you to be able to express yourself and be able to show somebody else how to do something by explaining." Another said, "It's right there in the portfolios." One junior high student who had lived in another state said, "I think the testing. I came from a state where they just did the basic skills where you fill in the dot. Now with KERA testing, it is all writing it out."

- **Extended school services.** Most students in the focus group interviews were familiar with extended school services. Many had positive comments about the program. One student noted, "They will probably learn more because there would be less people involved in the class, and the teacher would be able to work one- on-one with them." Another student said, "I think it gives a lot of advantages to the student because...the teachers can break it down for them and explain to them what they have to do to get the problem done. The student just relates to them better, I believe, just one-on-one."

- **Interdisciplinary group projects**. Students also responded to this question with respect to the increased group work, not necessarily the interdisciplinary nature. One student said, "It gives you different opinions on the answers. If you get answers from four different people you get balance, not just your own answer, and you can learn from it." Another said, "You get more involved. Your friends can get you involved in doing what they are doing, and you will want to help them do it." Still another reported, "I like that because each person gets to give their input on a problem but yet all of the people are putting everything together looking for their answers. And they're working together to teach others. I like that."

Others noted the problem of equal input. "I think in certain cases it works well, but I have been in groups where they expect one person to do everything. The teacher will put one faster learner, if it was a group of four, with three slower learners. The one person has to do the work of four because the others won't do it." Another student from the western Kentucky site suggested, "The only thing that I don't like about it at times is you are going to get people who sit back and not get involved and you end up doing the work." In one school, where group work had been incorporated even before KERA, students were not as in favor of group work.

- **Portfolios**. Students again responded with many comments about portfolios. One student noted, "I don't really like to write them, but I think it has helped me in writing because before KERA I didn't do much writing, especially in math. So I think that I am a better writer, but I don't like portfolios." A middle school student responded, "We have to explain things more. It encourages us to do more problems and write them two or three different ways."

  Students were again concerned about having portfolio assignments too close together and at the end of a semester. "Those teachers that cut it too close to the deadline, I think that they should spread them throughout the year so it would give you more time," said one student. Another reported, "They wait until the end of the deadline, and then, when you sit down to write your portfolios, I don't think that it is going to be my best portfolio." One student suggested, "I think a lot of the students think of the portfolio as a job they have to do or else. I think they should just look at it as maybe a large lesson and work on it over time."

- **New state assessment program**. Again, students talked about the increase in open-ended questions. Students had varied opinions about this type of response. One middle school student said, "It's judging you on how good a speaker you are. It is like some people who are not good with words make it sound like they don't know what they are talking about." "I like it better than multiple choice," said another student.

  Students noted the fact that the testing was new and probably needed some modifications. One student offered, "It's just getting started. I mean, as KERA testing grows, teachers will understand it more, and students will understand it more."

- **Youth Services Center**. Students were familiar with this component in only one site. These students reported that the center "helps people out" and provides services for teen moms. One student suggested, "They have a lot of programs to help students, to help you get jobs and things." Another student's family had recently experienced a fire in their home. The YSC provided assistance to this family and was described as having been very helpful throughout the ordeal.

- **School council**. Though each school had a council, as with the individual interviews, students were not very familiar with this component. One student indicated, "They design everything for the schools, make the major decisions." Others had parents that served on the council. A student described one example, "My mom has been on it for two years, but I'm not really sure what kind of effect it's had. I think to a certain extent, especially from a parent's point of view, students talk to their parents and because of that, they sort of get input from a student's point of view." Another (from a school with an alternative council structure that included students) said, "It definitely helps a lot. It gets not only the teachers and the principals, but it gets the parents and students and everybody involved." Another student said, "I think students should be involved more than they already are."

(4) Have those changes affected your education, and if so, how? Several themes were noted in the responses to this question. An interesting theme was that students thought they were being held more accountable as a result of the reform components, even though KERA does not mandate that students are accountable for their school's performance. Others indicated their performance was better. "I am getting a lot better grades this year under this," said one student.

Still others described developing new skills. One student responded, "It has taught us how to associate with all kinds of people." Another said, "They encourage us to explain things better and do things in different ways." One respondent remarked, "It's been positive in the group. That's going to help probably to work with others in college and so on in life. I like that. The stress and some other factors kind of bring it down just a little bit, but overall it has been a very good program."

Some students noted negative effects, such as increased stress and time away from other courses. One student noted, "It's given me a lot of stress on my class work. For me, I know that for these tests, I'm going to have to really concentrate, and since these tests have started, my grade point average has dropped some because I...took so much time concentrating on the tests

instead of my class work." Another said, "It has effected our education. For one...it still holds us back because teachers spend days talking about one subject, it has added more stress."

(5) What are the two most important things you need to know or be able to do by the time you graduate from high school? The responses to this question echoed those from the individual interviews. Students indicated that they needed to "know the basics," be prepared for the real world (college, work, family), to work and communicate with others, and have good written and oral communication skills.

One student commented, "I think especially the group work...a lot of students have never really had the opportunity to work with other people, and that's something that you definitely have to know how to do in the outside world and in college." Another reported, "First, I think you should definitely know how to do English, math, you know, reading and writing. I think you should know how to survive once you get out of high school." One student noted, "The kind of stuff you learn in kindergarten."

(6) What would you like to see KERA do for students in Kentucky? Responses to this question were similar to those of other questions in the interview, but one theme stood out--motivating students. "I think that for the ones that don't care, they should make them want to learn," one student said. Another indicated, "I think that everyone should be close to their fullest potential, because if they don't learn everything that they can, or do their best, there is no point in doing it." "I think it needs to motivate kids some way. There are so many kids that just don't even care about things. They need to find something that'll motivate them and make them want to learn," another respondent reported.

Respondents also indicated that KERA should instill pride in the students of Kentucky. "Kentucky schools should go from way down here to way up here [indicating]. That, I think, will give Kentucky students more pride in their school...in their state," one student commented. Another noted, "If KERA reforms the way it should, students are going to do their work better. That will take them toward the top of the educational ladder. The students are going to have to take pride in their school, community."

Another frequently expressed theme was applying knowledge to the real world. "Almost everything that we learn in school applies to something and surely would be a point of interest, and students just need to realize that."

CONCLUSIONS

Before discussing the tentative conclusions of this study, it is important to reiterate the purpose of this investigation. This study was commissioned by the Kentucky Caucus of the AEL Board of Directors to assess student perceptions of the Kentucky Education Reform Act. A qualitative research approach was selected to assess student perceptions and achieve the objectives of this study. Focus group interviews represent one useful technique used in such qualitative research. Focus group interviews help to determine the perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking of various consumer groups. The students of Kentucky are clearly the most important consumers of KERA.

Caution is in order, however, when employing such a qualitative approach. While the methodology associated with qualitative research elicits rich, in-depth responses, the information in this document ***is not*** intended to represent the views of students throughout all of Kentucky. It

is intended to accurately represent the perceptions of the student participants in this study. Thus, while the conclusions discussed within this report are not generalizable, these initial observations and student statements may help generate hypotheses for further research.

Students (N=96) from three very different districts and six different schools proved ***fairly knowledgeable and articulate*** about those aspects of the reform that had affected them directly (especially writing portfolios).

Student participant comments indicated their awareness of a ***common perception*** that Kentucky schools and students are below national standards in educational achievement. Students felt KERA might help Kentucky students compete with students from other states for college admission and employment.

Though students reported increased work associated with the portfolios, most thought the portfolio work was ***improving their writing***. Students indicated that math portfolios allowed them the opportunity to explain their work more thoroughly.

For the most part, students enjoyed the additional group work. Many indicated the importance of working with others in the real world, so improvement in ***communication and interpersonal skills*** was meaningful.

Students report that KERA has increased ***stress*** on teachers and students. Some worry about the state taking control of their school if performance is below threshold. The portfolio system elicits some stress due to deadlines. Students expressed a great deal of concern about the new assessment system, KIRIS. No one knew what to expect (teachers and students).

School councils seemed to be viewed positively, to the extent students were aware of them. Some students viewed school governance as having been very "political" in the past. It

appears that most students who were aware the councils existed thought the school councils were doing what was best for students.

Extended school services appeared to be ***very useful*** to students. Though many participants had not directly engaged in ESS activities, they reported being very aware of the services and described positive experiences of others.

Students described the importance of ***computers and technology***. They also indicated that the reform should "***make school fun***." They reported that students learn more when school is enjoyable.

Overall, students thought KERA was having a positive effect on their education. Their responses were more positive than negative. Those who expressed negative opinions about KERA seemed to be primarily concerned with the effect that reform might have on preparation for and acceptance at college.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Site Visit Letters

AEL

Improving Education Through Research and Development

Date

Principal
Selected School
Address

Dear Principal:

The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), under direction from its Board, has been charged with conducting a special project to ascertain students' perceptions of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) activities in middle and high schools. Your school was one of several visitation sites proposed.

As noted in our earlier phone conversation, the two primary data collection methods are focus group and individual interviews with students randomly selected from your school. Instructions for student selection are enclosed with this correspondence for your information. A tentative date for the visit to your school is (date). Please sign below to confirm this date and provide permission to visit you school and conduct the research outlined. Please make a copy for your records and return the original in the enclosed envelope at your earliest convenience.

Thank you for allowing us to visit your school. We look forward to the upcoming visit and interviews.

Sincerely,

Pam Coe
Research and Development Specialist

Gregory D. Leopold
Research and Evaluation Specialist

GL:ksc
Enclosures

_____
Principal

Appalachia Educational Laboratory • *A nonprofit corporation • An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer*
P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325-1348 • Shipping 1031 Quarrier Street, Charleston, WV 25301-2314
Telephone 304/347-0400 • Toll free 800/624-9120 • FAX 304/347-0487

APPENDIX B

Student Selection Instructions

STUDENT SELECTION AND SCHEDULING PROCEDURES

We would like to have ten students participate in the focus group interview and six students participate in individual interviews with AEL staff. We can select these students in one of two ways. First, you can fax or mail class lists of the upper two grades in your school and AEL staff can randomly select the students. Or, if you prefer, you can randomly select the students yourself and provide a list of those students that are selected. A total of 16 students (5 at each of the upper two grade levels for the focus group interview and 3 at each of the upper two grade levels for individual interviews) should be selected. We have provided a draft parent permission letter for your use with the selected students. If you could copy the permission letter on your school's letterhead, it would be helpful.

We would like to interview the students at your convenience, so please note the times you would like us to interview. We should be able to complete all of the activities during the morning. The focus group interview should take approximately 50 minutes, while the individual interviews should take approximately 20 minutes. Any quite room or area of the school that you assign should serve well for the interviews.

We would like to complete our visit with a short (no more than 20 minutes) exit interview with you. During this discussion, we will briefly describe the data collected and ask you a few questions about the impact of KERA on your students. Please schedule this time at your convenience as well.

If you have any questions, please call Greg Leopold or Pam Coe at 1-800-624-9120. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

APPENDIX C

Inventory

Name: _____

School: _____ Grade: _____

Please find below some parts of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) of 1990. We would like to know if you are familiar with any of the parts. There are no right or wrong answers. Please check "yes" or "no" for each question. If your answer is "yes," please indicate on the scale how you would rate your school. If you do not participate in a program, pleasecheck "do not participate."

Sample Questions:

A. Does your school have a KERA Primary Program?

☐ Yes ☐ No

B. If yes, how would you rate the success of the KERA Primary Program? (Circle one number and check one box.)

1 2 3 4 5
Unsuccessful Very Successful

☐ Do not participate ☐ Participate

---

1. How much do you know about the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA)?

1 2 3 4 5
Nothing A lot

2. Does your school have Extended School Services (ESS)?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

If yes, how would you rate the effectiveness of these Extended School Services? (Circle one number and check one box.)

A. After-school tutoring

1 2 3 4 5
Ineffective Very Effective

☐ Do not participate ☐ Participate

B. Before-school tutoring:

1 2 3 4 5
Ineffective Very Effective

☐ Do not participate ☐ Participate

C. Tutoring on weekends:

1 2 3 4 5
Ineffective Very Effective

☐ Do not participate ☐ Participate

D. Summer School:

1 2 3 4 5
Ineffective Very Effective

☐ Do not participate ☐ Participate

3. Does your school have Youth Services Centers (YSC)?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

If yes, how would you rate the effectiveness of the Youth Services Centers?

1 2 3 4 5
Ineffective Very Effective

☐ Do not participate ☐ Participate

4. How often do you work in groups on tasks that include more than one subject?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Occasionally Often

5. Do your teachers cooperate to teach interdisciplinary units?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Occasionally Often

6. Do students have more choice about what they work on?

1 2 3 4 5
Not at all Many more choices

7. Name one thing you know most about KERA.

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Interview Protocol

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTION:

Hello! My name is _____ and assisting me today is _____. We work at the Appalachia Educational Laboratory in Charleston, West Virginia. We'd like to thank you for participating in our discussion today. We have been asked to lead discussions with students like yourselves in some middle and high schools in Kentucky to get their ideas about education reform efforts in their schools.

Before we start the focus group discussion, we are going to ask you to fill out a short questionnaire. You may not be familiar with everything on the questionnaire. If you do not understand a question, just leave that question blank.

Thank you for the questionnaires. Now, let's talk about education reform.

Before we start, I'd like to talk about a few ground rules. First, no one in the group should be considered an expert, including myself. Everyone's thoughts are equally important. My job will be to make sure everyone gets a chance to give their opinions. We should not criticize each other's comments. Second, there are not any right or wrong answers, only different opinions. Third, since I won't be taking any notes, we'll be tape recording our discussion today so that I can go back and make sure I get your opinions right. Please remember that your comments will be completely confidential. That is, no one will listen to the tapes but _____ and myself. No teachers, principals, or parents will hear the tapes. We will summarize the information from each discussion around the state, but no one's names will be attached to any of the comments.

With those guidelines in mind, let's begin!

1. In your own words, what do you think school reform in Kentucky means?

2. What should school reform accomplish?

3. What changes have you noticed in your education since KERA was implemented in 1990? (PROBE for specific KERA components):
   a. Extended School Services (before-, after-, weekend, summer)
   b. Interdisciplinary group projects
   c. Portfolios (writing, math, other?)
   d. New state assessment program (performance event, NAEP-like)
   e. Youth Services Center
   f. School Council (SBDM)

4. Have those changes effected your education, and if so how? (PROBE: if not, why hasn't it changed?)

5. What are the two most important things you need to know or be able to do by the time you graduate from high school?

6. What would you like to see KERA do for students in Kentucky?

APPENDIX E

Individual Student Interview Protocol

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT INTERVIEW

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

School: _____ Grade: _____

Interviewer: _____

1. In your own words, what do you think school reform in Kentucky means?

2. What should school reform accomplish?

3. What changes have you noticed in your education since KERA was implemented in 1990? (PROBE for specific KERA components:)

   a. Extended School Services (before-, after-, weekend, summer)
   b. Interdisciplinary group projects
   c. Portfolios (writing, math, other?)
   d. New state assessment program (performance event, NAEP-like)
   e. Youth Services Center
   f. School Council (SBDM)

4. Have those changes effected your education, and if so how? (PROBE: If not, why hasn't it changed?)

5. What are the two most important things you need to know or be able to do by the time you graduate from high school?

6. What would you like to see KERA do for students in Kentucky?

APPENDIX F

Principal Exit Interview Protocol

PRINCIPAL EXIT INTERVIEW

Name:_____ School:_____

First, we want to thank you again for allowing us to come into your school and collect this information. Your students and staff have been most cooperative in assisting us with our tasks. The final report of the project will be completed in late spring, and will be forwarded to you shortly thereafter.

To help us complete the report and establish a clearer context in which to interpret the responses from the students, we would like to ask you a few brief questions.

1) What components of KERA have been implemented in your school as of this school year?

2) Which components have been easy to implement? Why?

3) Which components have been difficult to implement? Why?

4) How do you think your faculty members have received KERA?

5) How do you think the parents of children in your school have received KERA? What are some typical responses?

6) What do you think the major impact of KERA has been on your students to date?

7) How do you expect KERA to affect your school between now and 1996?

8) Is there anything else you would like to tell us about KERA in your school that we did not think to ask?

Thank you for your time and cooperation. Should you have any concerns or need any further information, please contact Pam Coe or Greg Leopold.